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Minorities in Islam

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World Religions

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Research Presentation Paper: Minorities in Islam

I began my research on Islam by talking to my childhood friend, Gizman Baraso, about her Muslim faith. From listening to her describe her own personal experience, I was able to determine the direction I wanted to take with my research. Gizman is a female Ethiopian Sunni Muslim; she feels that much of her perspective on life is affected by being a triple minority, and she has noticed ways that the Muslim religious community responds to her gender and race. In this essay I will use information from Gizman's story and incorporate insight from additional sources to better understand and explain what it is like to be an adherent of a minority religion, such as Islam, in America, along with what it is like to be a racial and gender minority in the Muslim community.

Gizman did a wonderful job of outlining her experience as a Muslim in a predominantly Christian or secular nation like America. For most of our conversation, Gizman helped me understand the foundational practices of Islam and shared with me how she chooses to apply these practices in her life. One of the first aspects of her faith that Gizman brought up was community. Religious community is helpful, she said, in keeping her committed to her faith. For Gizman, public highschool was a more discouraging, challenging, and isolating environment because there was little religious diversity in the student body. We went to the same highschool, and I agree with her that it was a predominantly Christian and/or secular environment, which is somewhat reflective of the American population. Gizman also mentioned that even the few

Muslims who attended our highschool were less committed to their faith than her Muslim peers in college. In the past two years, Gizman has found freedom and encouragement to practice her faith because of the strong Muslim community at her college, The University of Texas at Dallas. Gizman likes this religious community because she feels that she can more comfortably say no to things that go against her religion, like partying, drinking, and even eating during the month of Ramadan when Muslims are fasting. She also mentioned that she feels like Islam is growing more common in America now than it was in her childhood. Gizman reports that with this growth, she has not been as commonly insulted, but rather gets asked questions about her faith. Gizman did tell me that once, at a high school Cross Country meet, some students called her Osama Bin Laden, which was hurtfully memorable to her. This insult to Gizman is an example of a phenomenon particularly significant in America known as *Islamophobia*, defined by the Council on Islamic Relations as the irrational fear of Islam. Islamophobia was aggravated to arguably the worst extent in United States history after the notorious 9/11 attack in New York City. However, less obvious prejudices against American Muslims have persisted for multiple centuries, as they have always been a religious minority in this country.

Gizman's observations from her life experience are affirmed by the American experience at large in an article titled "Islam in America" by Aminah Beverly McCloud. McCloud traces American Muslim history back to the West African slave trade in the sixteenth century. Muslim slaves that were forcefully brought to America "struggled to keep their religious practices, their social values, and so on, in the midst of one of the most oppressive conditions known in history" (McCloud 12). While these Muslim slaves were intelligent, multilingual men who "came as Muslims and remained as Muslims," their successful religious determination has gone largely unnoticed. McCloud writes, "the Muslim presence during this period has skillfully been masked

by most American historians as a more palatable history... with an overwhelming Christian influence” (McCloud 12). From the beginning, Muslims have been historically oppressed and now dismissed. Their struggles are not discussed or taught as a significant part of history. For Gizman, it seems that the dismissal has been the most pressing issue in modern times, or at least in her own life. While she has not been oppressed by government authorities directly, she has felt lonely and alienated by the white, Christian, patriarchal society that prevails in America.

When I asked Gizman how religious she felt she was, she replied that her family is ‘average’ in relation to their Muslim community but seen as more extremely religious in the context of American culture. She gave the example of one of the five pillars of Islam, the five daily prayers, saying that Americans see this as an overwhelmingly demanding religious discipline. Along with five daily prayers at sunrise, midday, between midday and sunset, sunset, and night, there are additional optional prayers. When it comes to practicality, Gizman said that keeping up with the five prayers is hardest in the winter because of the early sun setting time. At the beginning of each session of prayer, Gizman told me that she washes her hands, arms, and face. Then, she stands and reads the designated verses, and if a leader is present, they will say the prayer out loud. Gizman told me that there have been many times when she couldn’t get one or more of these prayers in because of her schedule as an American high school or college student, with classes and other extracurricular commitments occurring during designated prayer times. In addition, there is a social challenge present for Gizman when she is the only Muslim in a given context when it’s time for the next prayer. In a variety of ways, it is hard for a Muslim to adhere to the daily prayer schedule when they are living an American life.

Gizman then told me about many of the rules in Islam. Pork is prohibited to Muslims, and Gizman jokingly told me she often finds that some of her Muslim peers seem to be more

concerned with not consuming pork than not consuming alcohol, though both are strictly prohibited. This disconnect is likely caused by the pressures of growing up as a Muslim in the American party culture. Gizman said the strictest Muslims only eat halal or pure meat, while others will accept meat prepared by adherents of the Abrahamic religions: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim. Gizman and her family are not strict about the source of their meat because it is very difficult to know exactly who meat comes from in modern America, but they do their best to buy meats from Muslim markets. Another variance in commitment among Muslims concerns memorizing the Quran. Gizman only has one chapter of the Quran memorized and no one in her family has the whole book memorized. None of them speak Arabic, the original language of the Quran, either. Muslims largely consider the Arabic Quran to be the only accurate Quran, while any other language Quran can only be read as a commentary. While they cannot understand the Quran in its original language, Gizman and her siblings have been consistent attendees of Sunday school at the local mosque, and Gizman reports that she is always learning about her faith. Gizman explained her family's choices to me with a quote she's learned as a Muslim: "God doesn't make religion hard for you." Gizman told me that every Muslim knows what they're 'supposed to do,' but what rules they actually adhere to depends on how one is raised. Gizman said that she "sees where other Muslims are coming from" in their varying levels of strictness, but she insinuated that Allah is more concerned with the heart behind one's religious discipline level.

Race is another factor that creates differences and divisions among Muslims and, of course, among Americans of various beliefs and cultural subgroups. Gizman is the daughter of two immigrants from Ethiopia, so she is very much connected to the culture of her race as well as that of her religion. She travels to Ethiopia for the summers nearly every year since she was a

young child to visit her grandmother, who has lived in Ethiopia for her whole life. In going back and forth from America to Ethiopia regularly, Gizman has first-hand experience with the role her identity plays in the religious and cultural environments of Ethiopia and America, respectively. Gizman told me that Ethiopia is roughly fifty percent Muslim and fifty percent Christian. This is historically correct, though Christians hold the majority today. Gizman included that culture and religion are more closely connected in Ethiopia, so it is harder to stay focused on her Muslim faith when Christianity has such a rich culture surrounding it. While in America, Christian and Atheist or Agnostic individuals often share closely similar surface culture to outsiders, like Muslims, looking in. Essentially, both Muslims and Christians in Ethiopia use culture more as a means to apply their religious beliefs in their everyday life. According to an article titled “An Historical-Anthropological Approach to Islam in Ethiopia” by Jon Abbink, African branches of Islam have “been marked by a history of multiple interactions with pre-existing belief systems and with Christianity - both imported missionary Christianity and indigenous forms (Egypt, North Africa, Nubia, and Ethiopia)” (Abbink 110). Abbink asserts that Islam in Ethiopia has stayed relatively understudied by scholars of Islam and has not only undergone many “notable political changes since 1991, but also... late twentieth-century conditions of political, economic and cultural globalization” (Abbink 110). Much like Islam in America, Ethiopian Islam “has always been a religion with secondary and... inferior status” because it emerged under the shadow of Christianity in the nation (Abbink 113). In another article, “Minorities in Islam; Muslims as Minorities” by Nelly Van Doorn-Harder, she writes that “gaining a valid Muslim-Ethiopian identity” is the goal of many Ethiopian Muslims living in Ethiopia. From my time spend listening to Gizman’s frustrations as an Ethiopian Muslim living in America, the same goal of establishing identity is shared.

However, the difference between native Ethiopian Muslims and those living in America is the identity of the majority group they feel overshadowed by. While both countries' Muslim populations are overshadowed by Christian populations, native Ethiopian Muslims are particularly trying to sustain an identity apart from Ethiopian Christians, while Ethiopian Muslims living in America are fighting for a stable Muslim identity among Arab Muslims, which necessitates their need to overcome the struggle of colorism in some Muslim communities. In Gizman's year-round home in the Dallas area, most of the local Muslim community is made up of Arabic Indians. Black Muslims are a minority in American Islam. Gizman expressed her frustration with the racism she has encountered from members of her own mosque. Many of the Arab Muslims in Gizman's religious community regularly say the n-word, which is very offensive when coming out of the mouths of anyone who is not black. This year, Gizman's university started a Black-Muslim alliance out of a real and present need for unity between Arab and Black Muslims. Gizman finds that she naturally bonds more closely with Black Muslims because of their shared experiences as double minorities not only in comparison to the national population but also in comparison to the religious population of Islam. With non-Muslim Blacks, however, Gizman notices more of a struggle with peer pressure in her experience. As a racial and religious minority, it has been challenging for her to find a place to feel like her fullest self, whether around Arab Muslims or Blacks who adhere to other beliefs. Like Muslims in Ethiopia, Gizman also feels the disconnect between herself and Ethiopian Christians living in America. For any Ethiopian Muslims, the combination of identifying as a minority race in a minority religion is challenging in both the many racial and religious circles they participate in routinely.

In addition to this two-sided struggle of race and religion, female Ethiopian Muslims endure the struggles that come with a gender minority identity. As minorities in religion, race,

and gender, Gizman told me that her and her mother specifically have had to ‘reach out’ to members of their local Muslim community more than other members of the mosque they attend in order to feel like they belong there. For the two of them, both race and gender play a part in their feelings of exclusion among their own religious community. Women are addressed and instructed in the Quran, so there is plenty of textual content to work with in terms of Islam’s treatment of women. Modesty is the most public and commonly recognized issue with women in Islam. Gizman clarified that while women are required to wear the Hijab according to the Quran, the Quran also says that men must always be covered from their belly button to their knees. While both genders have modesty rules included in the Quran, every Muslim interprets and applies the Quranic rules differently, as Gizman mentioned in regard to other key Muslim practices. Regarding the Hijab, Gizman told me that the hijab is supposed to be worn by choice by female Muslims when they hit puberty. She made this choice and found the choice to be easy because she was involved with her Muslim community at the local mosque. However, she remembers that starting to wear the hijab to her public middle school was hard because she was one of only a few Muslims at the school. There are other rules that come along with a woman’s choice to wear the hijab, such as no shorts and no short sleeves. Gizman said that it took her longer to adhere completely to the clothing rules because she was in athletics in school. While she started wearing the hijab in middle school, she would wear shorts for Cross Country practice until her Junior year of high school. Lastly, Gizman told me that the hijab is supposed to represent who one is on the inside, so bad behavior from a hijabi makes them a hypocrite to Islamic eyes. When it comes to styling herself around these strict rules, Gizman says that she has learned to be creative by following Muslim fashion bloggers and layering trendy clothing with modest underclothes, such as turtlenecks and leggings.

Because Islam is a minority religion in America, the hijab is often dismissed as a restriction put on Muslim women, and “few empirical studies have examined how the hijab may serve as a source of empowerment and, as such, contributes to their understanding of their own body image in relation to mainstream, Western images of the empowered or feminist woman,” which typically does not include a hijabi (Beckmann 325). Especially after the 9/11 attacks, “Muslim women became the symbolic image of oppression and violence” by American media (Beckmann 326). Due to the media’s poorly generalized description of Muslim women, many of these women, like Gizman, find themselves defending “against the perception of Islam as being both oppressive and violent (Beckmann 326).

In conclusion, race, gender, and religious affiliation each play a critical role in a person’s physical, emotional, and physical experience in life. Further, each member of a religion has unique qualities and ideals that they hold to as central to their identity. Because of this, it is important to listen to the specific religious adherent one is conversing with to avoid generalizations. In the case of people who identify with racial, gender, or religious minorities, it is helpful to empathize with the plight of being overshadowed, ignored, and sometimes even oppressed, that these people have endured. By being aware of the struggle that comes with being a minority, those within the Muslim religion can learn to be more inclusive of the racial and gender minorities in their communities, and Christians, especially in America, can learn to be more accepting and hospitable to their Muslim neighbor by not asking them offensive questions, assuming negative things about them, or assuming how they choose to apply the teachings of their faith. The historical sufferings of minority groups are evidence that people have not yet acknowledged, much less appreciated, the diversity of humanity. While one people group may not agree with the lifestyle of another people group, no progress can be made in either direction

for either people group without empathy. Through both my research on Islam and personal encounters with Muslim women, I have real-world, practical experience to tie to understanding of the empathetic phenomenology theory we have been studying in World Religions. Empathetic phenomenology refers to a strategy of studying a religion that uses selflessness, understanding, and patience to thoroughly and thoughtfully consider every part of the religion. While I did not consider every part of Islam in this essay, I aimed to study multiple perspectives of minorities to empathetically research and write on this topic in relation to the Muslim faith. In doing this, I hope that I have produced a research paper that reflects the tenants of empathetic phenomenology and explains the experience of minorities in the context of Islam, and Islam as a minority religion, in a compassionate and complete manner.

Word Count: 2810

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